

LUMPHEAD ROAD

Why did I listen to Uncle Billy? He said joining a frat was smart, that it would build me lifelong connections. Did I want connections with these guys? Barely an hour into the pledge party, I'd already seen more assholes than a proctologist does in a week. At least the beer was free.

Once we'd guzzled half a dozen cups of Schlitz, listened to every Doors song ever written, and suffered all the drunken toasts a guy can take, Eric Trebner, the golden-haired house president raised his hand, the signal that it was time for us to "do it". He threw open a door and led me and the other two pledges out of the beer soaked Zeta Alpha Theta house.

"It'll be easy," he said once we'd moved far enough from the music to hold a conversation. "All you have to do is bring back the dog and you're in." He raised a red plastic cup to his lips as two other Zetas stepped around the red bricked corner, their beers sloshing. One was Collin, the freckle-faced redhead who'd made the toast about bros before hoes, the other a string bean with pork chop sideburns. As one, they tipped back their beers and burped. Stereo.

Besides the beer, the guy with the sideburns was also carrying a plastic trash bag which he passed to Randy, the little chubster pledge.

"At least let us take a shovel," Randy pleaded. "Some gloves...?"

Before anyone could answer, the door we'd come out of slammed open and a big bear of

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a guy lurched out the door, picked out a healthy looking azalea bush, and started to pee.

Ignoring the gushing stream beside him, the freckle-faced guy shook his head. “Sorry, all pledges get is the bag.”

Eric grinned. “Ten years ago you wouldn’t have gotten that.”

As if planned, the three Zetas saluted, turned, and headed off toward the back of the house, impressively synchronized for a bunch of half-lit frat boys.

At least we were taking Sean’s car and not mine. A good-looking jock type, Sean had been the only one dumb enough to drive to the initiation party. I tossed my cup into the bushes and trailed Sean and Randy to the parking lot.

As it turns out, my Uncle Billy had been a Zeta too. Warned about the dog thing, I’d left my old Vega home. Sure, it was a tuna can, but hauling around a stinking dog carcass sure wasn’t gonna improve it.

Even though Sean’s Chevelle was tons better than my car, it was nowhere close to new. After a few whiny cranks, the V-8 roared to life, and Sean maneuvered it out onto the street. “Anybody know the area?” he asked.

In the back seat Randy, a Pillsbury Doughboy with black Brillo pad hair, shook his head. “I’m new here. How about you, Martin?”

“Only been here a week.”

Sean held up a piece of folded binder paper. “Here’s the directions Eric gave me.”

Before Randy had the chance, I snatched the paper and pressed the creases flat against my thigh. “Okay...Lumphead Road...,” I said, squinting down at the pencil-drawn map. “Pretty dumb name for a street.”

Immediately, Randy sat forward, his big head poking between the bucket seats. “Weren’t

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you listening to what Eric said? Lumphead Road is just what the locals call it. Its real name is Pennington, but he said there won't be any markers." He let loose a giggle worthy of any ten-year-old girl and reached between the seats, tapping the map with a pudgy finger. "Looks like we already missed the first turn."

I cut my eyes at him. "Thanks for pointing that out, Ran-dee."

Sean reached for the map. "Geez, Martin. You lost us already?"

"Hell no." I slid it over to my right leg out of everybody's reach. "Turn left at the next street."

The route took us on a zigzag path out of the city, past a field of cows and into the redwoods, but never far from the coastline. It might have been boring, but Sean had an amazing eight track player and we blasted The Allman Brothers the whole way.

As we closed in on our destination a thick fog began to roll in, giving everything a creepy, Wolfman movie feeling. Sean turned on the windshield wipers, and they slogged back and forth to the music. When a narrow rust-covered bridge appeared in front of us I snapped on the overhead light to check the map.

"We make a left just after," Know-it-all Randy announced.

I flicked the paper into the shadows at my feet. "Shit, man. What'd you do, memorize the thing?"

Sean downshifted into second gear and we rumbled across the bridge. A white haze covered any water that might have been flowing beneath it. After a few seconds a gravel drive came into view on our left.

"There!" I blurted, trying to beat Randy to it. "That's our next turn."

On the stump of a dead redwood, someone had nailed a hunk of plywood the size of a

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license plate. Sloppy and uneven, the letters looked like a kid had painted them. Or some retard.

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Stay Out!

I grinned and pointed it out to Randy. “You said there wouldn’t be any signs.”

He answered with another one of his girlish giggles. “Not me. That was Eric.” Again his fat, fuzzy head appeared between the seats. “Eric said there hasn’t been a real sign for years. Not supposed to be any houses either, just trees and some old abandoned orphanage from the forties.”

Yak, yak, yak. I imagined the little nerd sitting in the front row of Professor Eric’s classroom, his hand constantly raised.

“Okay, so now what?” Sean asked.

I reached for the map, but as I expected, Randy already knew.

“The old orphanage is down at the end, and the dead dog’s supposed to be right out front. Eric said we can’t miss it.”

Eric said. Eric said. I wadded up the paper and tossed it at Randy’s fat face. It bounced off his nose. Chalk one up for Martin.

Like a one car funeral procession, the Chevelle crawled down the road at five miles per hour. Any faster and the potholes would have bounced us around like popcorn.

Since Sean had ejected the tape and turned off the wipers, the only sound was the gravel crunching beneath our tires. The fog was ridiculous. I could make out moss-crusting fencing on either side of the road, but beyond that, nothing. For all I knew, a dozen Bigfoots were lined up ten feet away.

We edged our way through the white cloud with Sean stooped over the wheel and Randy’s head bobbing between the seats, his eyes darting from side to side. It wasn’t long before

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I found myself sitting forward too. My old man was a cop, and I could hear his words: *A fella with any sense would have stayed home.*

Whatever. If I'd listened to him, I'd still be weighing nails at that stupid Ace Hardware back in Elk Grove. I took another drag off my cigarette and forced myself to sit back.

I'd forgotten most of what Eric told us earlier that night, but Randy hadn't. As we putted along he repeated the story, low and solemn, like we were boy scouts sitting around a campfire. "According to Eric, the road was originally named after Dr. Charles Pennington, the guy who built the orphanage back in the 1940's. But it was shut down sometime in the '60's when the doctor was murdered by his patients. Turns out he'd been experimenting on some of the orphans, turning them into deformed freaks. After a while they rose up and bashed the guy's head in before running off into the forest."

I turned to look at Randy, cigarette dangling from my lips. "Yeah, I remember now. What'd Eric call 'em?"

"Lumpheads," Randy answered in a creepy half-whisper.

"Oh, I get it," said Sean. "Lumphead Road."

Duh.

Randy nodded and continued with the story. "Folks who live near here have seen them. Wandering through their property...stealing chickens. They even attacked a guy once. And they're fast too; chase down jackrabbits like they're turtles. And not just the original Lumpheads, either." His eyes narrowed. "They've been breeding."

The corners of Sean's mouth curved up slightly. "Come on, Randy. That's just bullshit the Zetas tell to spook the pledges."

"Sean's right," I said, fanning Randy's ghost story away. "Nobody can catch a jackrabbit."

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I tried once, and I'm fast. Played cornerback in high school, for christsake." I took another drag from my cigarette and made a special effort to face Randy so I could blow the smoke into his face. "Nah, that's just hazing bullshit."

Randy coughed and pointed out the front window. "Look out!"

As if it had been dropped there by a giant, a brick wall suddenly appeared in the car's headlights. I gripped the dash with both hands. Sean slammed on the brakes, and we lurched forward as the car skidded to a stop and stalled.

Holy crap! The wall, ten feet tall and less than a foot from the bumper, was all I could see. Vines had taken over most of it, but a huge brass nameplate told us we were in the right place, PENNINGTON ORPHANAGE. Randy had slumped forward between the seats due to the sudden stop and him being such a dork. Worried he might have broken Sean's awesome eight track player, I shoved him off and checked the device for damage.

"Sorry, guys." Sean blinked up at the ten foot wall. "Guess I didn't see the road bend with all this fog. Let's back this sucker up and go find Lassie." After a few cranks, the car sputtered back to life, and Sean pulled into the driveway a few yards away.

The car's headlights gave us a hazy view of a lumpy parking lot choked with nettles. Back when the orphanage was in business it might have held at least fifty cars. Now, the only things parking in that mess would be a few lizards, if that.

On the far side of the lot, the dilapidated building loomed over everything. All sharp edges and busted out windows, it glared down at us with twenty rectangular eyes, each blacker than the next. Below all the windows, crumbling red brick steps led to an open area in front of where the main doors had once stood, long ago swapped out for two warped sheets of graffiti-scrawled plywood.

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“What’s that?” Randy’s finger zipped forward between the seats, freezing above the gearshift.

At the top of the crumbling staircase, a dark shape bent over something smaller, like Dracula bending over a victim. It scuttled off as soon as the car’s lights hit it.

“What the hell?” I said. “Was that a wolf?”

Sean laughed. “More likely, just another dog.” He nudged the Chevelle closer to the steps, about twenty feet from the dead mutt.

“Leave the lights on,” I suggested.

Sean nodded and shut off the engine. Then he reached across me to open the glove compartment. What I saw there made my jaw drop.

Sitting on top of some old receipts was a nickel-plated .38 revolver, bright and shiny under the tiny glove compartment bulb. Ignoring the gun, Sean dug his hand beneath the papers and pulled out a flashlight. When he saw the way I eyed the pistol, he chuckled. “Dad makes me carry it; doesn’t want the Zodiac killer to get me if the car breaks down.”

“Maybe we should—” I reached into the glove compartment, but Sean brushed my hand away.

“Hey, it was just a dog.” When he saw how disappointed I was, he grinned. “Sorry, man, but it’s loaded, and guns make me nervous. Like I said, it was my dad’s idea.”

What a wimp. I mean, what kind of guy doesn’t like shooting at stuff?

We piled out of the car and climbed the steps. Somewhere in the dark, waves slammed against rocks.

As Eric had promised, there lay the carcass. From the looks of it, whatever we’d scared off had spent some quality time with the dead pooch. Its belly had been torn out, leaving a

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shaggy blood crusted pile of legs, head, and tail.

Sean shined the flashlight toward the corner of the building, the direction the animal had gone. Nothing moved.

Like a TV detective, Randy bent over the body. “Aw, poor guy. Looks like a mix between a wolfhound and some kind of sheepdog.”

My lips curled back in disgust as a sickly sweet smell rose up to meet us. “Looks like a chunk of old shag carpet to me. We’re lucky that thing ate some of it. Mutt wouldn’t have fit in the bag otherwise.”

Sean turned in a circle, scanning our surroundings with the light. “Let’s pick this thing up and get out of here.”

“Fine with me,” said Randy as he shook open the plastic bag. “I’m ready.”

Sean stuffed the flashlight in his back pocket and bent down. If he was cool with handling that mess, then great. But I sure wasn’t. When I didn’t rush to grab the dead dog, Sean frowned up at me, a blood-caked dog paw clutched in each hand. “Come on, Martin, grab him.”

“Me?” My face puckered. “I can’t.”

“What?” Sean straightened. “It won’t bite. Just take its feet.”

Like Randy was gonna do the easy job while I got dog guts all over me. I cupped my hand over my nose and mouth. “I can’t do it, man. It reeks! You don’t want me ralphing in your car, do you, Sean?”

Randy stretched out his hand, and for a second I thought he would pet me. “That’s okay, Martin. You can hold the bag.”

My one semester of high school drama class had just paid off.

Sean took hold of the hind legs, Randy the front. With half the guts gone, all that held the

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dog together was a stretch of skin and fur. It stripped away from the pavement with a sticky sucking sound, and for a second I thought Randy would puke right there.

“Breathe through your mouth,” Sean said, not looking so good himself. Randy nodded, and between the two of them they slid the dog’s hind quarters into the bag. That’s when a deep, ball-shriveling howl cut through the fog. We froze, all eyes on the forest.

I thought of the .38 going to waste back in the car.

“Maybe that other dog doesn’t like that we’re taking its dinner,” Randy whispered.

Without a word, we scrambled to shove what was left of the hound into the garbage bag. Once it was in, Sean grabbed the top edge of the sack and lifted. The carcass slid to the bottom with a squishy plop.

Another howl. This time the sound echoed off the side of the building. It was circling us.

“Let’s move,” Sean snapped.

An excellent idea.

Wolfhounds are huge dogs, and even though this one was ripped to hell, it still had to weigh a good eighty pounds. With their hands cradling the bottom, Randy and Sean hefted the bag, its disgusting contents stretching the plastic in all directions.

“Martin,” Sean huffed. “Open the trunk.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. I ran to the car, yanked the keys from the ignition, and raced to the back. “Which key is it?” I shouted as the other two shuffled down the steps with their load.

“The round one!” Sean called back.

I fingered through the twenty-odd keys. What was this guy, a janitor?

They reached me just as I swung the trunk open. After a few pushes, we stuffed the bag

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inside.

“Okay,” I said, relieved to be done with it all. “Let’s get—”

Randy grabbed our shoulders.

This time it wasn’t a howl. It was footsteps.

Heart pounding, I expected to see a big German shepherd or maybe even a wolf. What we saw was ten times scarier.

The creature shambled around the side of the building, arms thrashing. A lumpy gourd covered with patches of stringy black hair took the place of a head. But what got me most were its black and rotting hands.

Were the Zeta’s stories really true?

A ragged shirt and pants splattered with who-knows-what flapped in the breeze as the thing lurched toward us.

“What the fuck!” I ran to the passenger door.

“They...they’re real!” Idiot that he was, Randy froze, pinned to the spot like a fat beetle.

Sean slammed the trunk shut. “Randy, get in!” he yelled.

Since the doofus didn’t move, Sean dragged him to the driver’s side. I was already in my seat when Randy flopped into the back. Once Sean jumped in, we slammed the door locks and stared out the front window, chest heaving.

Not thirty feet away, the creature moved down the stairs leading to the building with a step, drag, step, drag, a lot like a kid towing a sledgehammer. It grinned at us with red lips stretched wide across sharp blood-soaked teeth.

Sean shined his flashlight out the back. “Oh, my god! There’s two!”

A few yards away, another creature lurched toward us across the parking lot.

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“Start the car!” Randy squealed.

Sean stabbed the key into the ignition. The engine gave a half crank and sputtered as the headlights dimmed then blinked out. Dead.

“Damn it!” Sean pounded the steering wheel. “Why did I leave the lights on?”

Not ready to die there, I flipped open the glove compartment.

Sean grabbed my arm. “Martin, wait...”

“What are you doing?” Randy whimpered from the back seat.

I grabbed the .38 and flung open the door. “Protecting myself.”

At the sight of the gun, the parking lot monster froze, hands raised in front of its face.

“Nooo!” it shrieked.

Screw him. I shot.

Boom! Flash! Bang! Funny how holding a gun can wash away all your fear. The stink of cordite filled my nose as the creature dropped to its knees, its filthy hands clutching at the red splotch on its shoulder.

With one down, I swung around to blast the other guy. It must have been faking the limp because now the thing was taking the orphanage steps three at a time. I followed.

“Die!” I shouted, firing as I ran.

Bang! That one hit the building.

Boom! A ricochet off the pavement as I reached the top step.

Again, I could hear my dad. *Who do you think you are, Wild Bill Hickok?* I stopped, set my feet, and took aim.

Even though the Lumphead had almost reached the front of the building, my shot caught him in the leg. He skidded across the concrete like a frozen turkey.

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With both Lumpheads down, Sean and Randy finally crawled out of the car. They gaped at me, eyes wide. To them, I was Superman.

I blew on the gun barrel and waved them over. “Come on. Let’s go see this guy up close.” Like ducklings behind their mama, they followed me to the spot where I’d dropped my last target.

Having pulled itself up against the building, the Lumphead’s hair flapped in the breeze like raggedy hunks of yarn. At the sight of my raised gun, two bloody hands flew up. “Don’t shoot! What the hell’s wrong with you?”

The three of us stared in amazement. Like some kind of freaky ventriloquist act, its lips had never moved. Why was that? And how come it sounded like—

Uh oh.

I held my breath as the creature grabbed hold of its throat and tore its rubbery skin away. With one easy, upward motion it revealed a sweaty but human face. Easy to recognize, since we’d seen it barely an hour ago.

“It’s me,” the bleeding Zeta panted. “Collin... from the frat house.”

Oh, shit! The freckle-faced guy! Shit, shit, shit!

Randy gasped. “Collin?”

Sean knelt beside the bleeding fraternity brother. “Then who’s the other guy?”

At that moment a red Mustang fishtailed into the parking lot. It slammed to a stop beside my first victim, and Zeta president Eric Trebner leaped out. “What the fuck did you do, Martin? It was just a prank...part of the hazing!”

“I-I didn’t know!” I tossed the pistol aside, and it skittered off into the weeds.

A million thoughts clogged my brain. Forget the Zetas, what would my dad say? Uncle

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Billy? Oh my god, the cops?

I gaped as Randy bandaged Collin's leg with a torn piece of Lumphead costume. I'd have stayed there all night if Sean hadn't dragged me across the parking lot toward Eric and the guy I'd shot in the shoulder.

Eric pulled the rubber mask from the guy's head shouting, "Doug! Doug! Wake up!" It was the frat boy with the pork chop sideburns. When he opened his eyes everyone let out a sigh of relief. Then they gave *me* the stink-eye.

"Hey, Sean and Randy thought they were real too!" I bellowed. "How was I supposed to—"

"Shut up!" Eric barked. "We've gotta get these guys to the hospital! Sean, help me lift Doug into my car." He gave me a hard shove. "You... go help Randy get Collin into the Chevelle."

Sean shook his head. "No good, the battery's dead. Leaving the headlights on must have drained it."

Again, everybody eyeballed me. I opened my mouth to argue, but Eric cut me off.

"Fine," he snapped. "We'll pile everyone into the Mustang."

All of us? I dragged my fingers through my hair. "But how we gonna fit?"

Instead of answering, Eric barreled past me. With Sean's help, they lifted Doug into the back seat.

Not looking for any more trouble, I hoofed it back to Randy. Together, we raised Freckles to his feet, dragged him down the steps to the car, and stuffed him in beside Sideburns. What a mess. Lucky for me, neither of the fake Lumpheads looked like they were gonna die anytime soon.

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I was about to slide in between them when Eric shoved me away. “No, that’s Randy’s spot.”

Fine. I kept my mouth shut and clomped over to the passenger side. Since Sean had already filled that seat, I hustled back to Eric. “What about me?”

Eric slid behind the wheel, his lips pressed together in disgust. “If I wasn’t in such a hurry I’d beat the shit out of you right now, Martin.”

I grabbed the top of the door frame. “Who are you to judge me anyway?” I shouted. “You guys killed a dog for this stupid prank.”

“It was already dead, stupid. Doug found it on the side of the road.”

“Oh.” I let go of the door.

“We’ll be back,” Eric muttered. “Once we drop these guys off...*and* find some jumper cables.” With that, he slammed the door and pulled off into the fog, leaving me nothing but the pounding waves for company.

Great. I looked around at the empty parking lot and the huge, rundown orphanage. So many windows. The place had been creepy enough before. Now that I was alone, it scared the crap out of me. I stomped the pavement, cussing out Eric, Sean, every guy that had ever joined a fraternity. Could things get any worse?

As if answering my question, a cold gust of wind sent dead leaves cartwheeling across my shoes. I snapped my down jacket all the way to my neck, and stuffed my hands in my pockets, wondering what to do. It didn’t take long to figure it out.

I had to pee, and bad. Since the side of Sean’s car seemed like the best place to do it, I headed over. On the way there I stumbled over a chunk of broken asphalt, scraping my knee. I picked it up and was seriously considering busting out the car’s windshield with it when a

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deafening growl burst from the forest.

Shit.

If a lion could have sex with a cement mixer, that's what their kids would sound like.

The asphalt slid from my fingers. There I stood in the middle of that empty parking lot, the last pin in the lane. All of a sudden Sean's Chevelle sounded really good. I shot toward it, relieved the windshield was still in one piece.

That's when I spotted the third Lumphead. It came sprinting out of the forest. Unlike the other two, this one was gigantic. It lurched toward me across the dead grass, its chest and knees covered in mud. No cheetah, but doing a decent clip. I wondered all over again if the stories were true.

With my heart pounding through my chest, I yanked on the Chevelle's chrome door handle. Locked. Probably Eric's idea. Now what? The orphanage?

No, the gun.

I hunched across the parking lot, eyes catching on anything shiny: gum wrappers, broken glass—God, did Eric take the pistol too?

I considered outrunning it. Then I remembered what Randy had said about Lumpheads being able to catch jackrabbits. What if this guy was only in first gear? Fuck running. Where was that gun?

My breath came in ragged bursts. Footsteps pounded the pavement behind me. FIND IT! FIND IT! FIND IT!

There, in that patch of nettles! I threw myself on it like a dog on meat, ignoring the zillion tiny needles stabbing at my fingers. But before I could grip the trigger the creature was on me. It ripped the .38 from my hands, threw me to the ground, and straddled my belly, forcing the

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air out. Claws tore at my jacket, scraped at my throat. I could barely see through all the tears.

“Hey, asshole!” it growled in its lion-slash-cement mixer voice. “What were you doing with that gun?”

Foiled *again?*

The thing tore off its muddy mask and slapped me across the face with it. “What happened?” As the stench of stale beer wafted down on me from his fat bearded face, I immediately remembered who he was. The big bearlike guy in the flowerbed. The one pissing on the azalea bushes.

I gasped. “I...we...”

The warmth of my pee must have soaked through to him, because he suddenly scrambled to his feet. When he caught a look at the front of my pants, his hairy face twisted into a combination of oh-my-god and what-the-fuck.

“Jesus, you pissed yourself.”

“Thanks for pointing that out.” I got up and refilled my lungs, hands on my knees. A perfect position for a look at the giant wet spot on my new corduroys. Could things get any worse?

The bear guy pulled off his rubber monster hands and flapped them at the empty parking lot. “So, where’s everybody else?”

“Gone.” I mumbled as piss dripped down my leg and into my new Adidas. “Something happened...Eric...” Suddenly, my stomach lurched and I barfed up the beer and Fritos I’d downed back at the frat house a hundred years earlier.

Before I could finish, the bear grabbed my shoulder and shook me hard enough to add vomit to my already piss-stained pants. “What do you mean, something happened?”

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That's when he spotted Sideburns' blood a few feet away. The next thing I knew he was dragging me toward the evidence.

"What the fuck is that?" He shoved my head down so it dangled over the blood, still shiny and fresh.

"Th-that?" I searched for an answer that wouldn't get my teeth knocked out. "Ruh-Randy?"

"Who's Randy?"

"The little guy. Th-the one with the Brillo pad hair. He thought your buddies were real, s-so he pulled out that gun and—"

"Holy shit! That could have been me!" Before I knew it he'd puked beer and what looked like half bag of tortilla chips all over my shoes. Some clung to his beard, and he mopped it away with the back of his hand. "Are...are they dead?"

I took in the mess decorating my sneakers and sighed, beyond caring. "No, just wounded. I volunteered to stay back. Sean let his car battery die, and there wasn't enough room for everybody in Eric's Mustang. They're on their way to the hospital now." I reached up and gave the bear's shoulder a sympathetic pat. "Guess with all the drama they forgot about you, big guy. Why didn't you come out with the other two?"

"Oh...yeah." His gaze fell to the pavement. "Must have drank too much beer. Got turned around in the fog. Lost really...fell down..." He motioned at the mud frosting his chest like a chocolate donut.

Just then a loud bang made us jump. We turned toward the building, ten yards away. The big plywood sheet that had covered the front door now lay flat on the concrete walkway.

I must have looked freaked, because the bear chuckled. "Calm down, little man. The

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wind blew it down. That's all."

Okay, but shouldn't it have been nailed tight? I peered back at the big square hole and gasped. A dark shape filled the doorway. Even though I knew I wouldn't like the answer, I had to ask. "That's not another Zeta, is it?"

The big bear licked his lips. "No."

As the thing stepped out into the moonlight, all doubt left me. This was a true Lumphead. A sly grin spread across its red clown lips as it ambled down the steps, one tennis ball sized eye narrowed on me.

And Lumpheads could catch jackrabbits. Well, I was no rabbit, but neither was the guy standing next to me.

I darted toward the gate. For a while, the bear kept up with me. For a while. No, I didn't have to be faster than a jackrabbit. I just had to be faster than the other guy.